

Dominic Bellenger and Simon Johnson eds., *Keeping the Rule: David Knowles and the Writing of History*, Stratton-on-the-Fosse: Downside Abbey Press, 2014, pp. 274, £25, ISBN: 978-1-898663-55-3

In 1939 Dom David Knowles walked out of Ealing Priory, after a period of difficulties with his monastic superior, the abbot of Downside. His personal sense of vocation called for a contemplative and self-sufficient style of life that teaching in St Benedict's school could not provide. From 1944 he held academic posts at his alma mater, Cambridge University, where he was Regius Professor of Modern History from 1954 to 1963. From 1957 to 1961 he was president of the Royal Historical Society. Even outside the abbey, his manner of life followed his monastic ideal. To all intents and purposes he was a monk without a monastery, working in a collegiate community that might not in all respects have been congenial to his personal asceticism. Between leaving the monastery and entering academia, he published the first volume of a monumental work that set English monastic history on sure foundations, and did so in stylish prose, an achievement for which he can be regarded as "England's Mabillon" (relying as he did primarily on published sources, he was not in all respects another Mabillon).

The third and final volume of his *The Religious Orders in England*, that on English religious houses in the Tudor period, was printed in 1959 and was later boiled down into the more popular *Bare Ruined Choirs*, the work for which he is perhaps best known to general readers. To mark the semi-centenary of the completion of his *magnum opus*, Downside Abbey hosted a series of lectures in 2009–2012, seven of which have been selected for publication in *Keeping the Rule*. Some of these still retain very strong marks of oral delivery, others have been thoroughly reworked for publication. One has already appeared in print in the *Journal of the Historical Association* and is reprinted here.

The contributors follow three different approaches. Some study Knowles himself, some directly discuss his contributions to the field of monastic history, while others provide more recent scholarship on questions he addressed, with little more than a dutiful mention of Knowles in passing. Contributions of the first type, on Knowles himself, elucidating his intellectual and institutional milieu, are Nicholas Vincent's 'Arcadia Regained?' and Michael Bentley's 'Knowles and the Historians'. Bentley considers the ties to other medieval and monastic historians, showing some interesting intersections in twentieth-century historiography, both British and European. Vincent examines the more personal influences of his contemporaries in school, college and monastery. Vincent's 72-page biographical essay is by far the longest piece in the volume (longer even than the three shortest pieces combined), and can fairly be described as the heart of the book.

The volume's first piece, however, is Sarah Foot's 'The Earliest English Benedictines?' This goes the furthest back in time, to discuss Knowles's decision to begin his *The Monastic Order in England* (the forerunner to *The Religious Orders in England*) with the appointment of St Dunstan as abbot of Glastonbury. The point at issue is when monasteries in England began to take the Rule of St Benedict as the basis of their rule of life, and hence from what date monks or nuns can meaningfully be said to belong to an order, rather than to individual communities.

The essays that address Knowles's scholarship also include James G. Clark's 'The Religious Orders in England and the End of the Middle Ages' and Benjamin Thompson's 'Knowles and the Alien Priors'. Clark outlines how (and why) Knowles broke new ground in volume two of his *Religious Orders* by treating late-medieval monasticism as a phenomenon in its own right, rather than a decay of the High Medieval or a prelude to Dissolution, and discusses more recent developments in this area. Thompson mostly laments Knowles's failure to give adequate treatment to priories in England that were dependent on Continental houses, attributing this to prejudice on Knowles's part: his strongly held belief that a good monastery was autonomous (a commitment underlying the crisis in his own monastic career) blinded him to the interest and importance of houses that were not only dependent, but, in some cases, dependent on houses which were not even English. The tone is surprisingly combative, given that the failure being criticized is that of somebody who died more than forty years ago, but perhaps this indicates how strongly Knowles still dominates the landscape.

Janet Burton's 'After Knowles' discusses neither Knowles the man nor his work, but gives a brief and varied overview of how the field of medieval monastic history has been transformed in recent decades. Somewhat similarly, G. W. Bernard's 'The Dissolution of the Monasteries', although nodding to Knowles, is primarily devoted to developing a distinct position on the Dissolution as the work not solely of money-grubbing careerists, but also of serious-minded Erasmians and other reformers who held high ideals that did not incorporate an appreciation of the spiritual or temporal benefits of monastic life. He makes a persuasive, but not necessarily compelling, case for the 1536 dissolution of smaller monasteries as an honest attempt to reform monastic life in England, rather than a cynical practice run for the more general dissolution that followed in 1540. The latter, rather than a long-term objective, would then have emerged ad hoc out of the rapidly changing situation of the few intervening years.

Bernard's piece on the Dissolution, and those of Vincent and Bentley on Knowles's twentieth-century context, are the items most relevant to the focus of *British Catholic History*. None of the

contributions gives much consideration to Knowles's writings on intervening periods of history or historiography (such as his essays on Mabillon and on Gasquet), or to his writings on mysticism, a decision that is understandable given the origins of the collection in lectures to celebrate the completion of *The Religious Orders in England*. Welcome and illuminating as these essays are, there is much still to be said about Knowles and his writing.

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Dominic Aidan Bellenger, *Monks with a Mission: English Benedictine History*, Bath: Downside Abbey Press, 2014, pp. 264, £30.00, ISBN: 978-1-898663-50-8

Dominic Aidan Bellenger, *Monastic Identities: Essays in the History of St Gregory's, Downside*, Bath: Downside Abbey Press, 2014, pp. 237, £30.00, ISBN: 978-1-898663-49-2

It is something of an irony that in simultaneously producing two books which continually explore the tension between the monastic and the missionary, Downside Abbey Press has acted with something like an un-contemplative haste. Still, the life of contemplation's loss is the historian's gain with the publication of Dominic Aidan Bellenger's essays. The books are designed as companion pieces, the first, *Monks with a Mission*, focussing largely on the penal period (though bleeding into the nineteenth century), the second, *Monastic Identities*, covering the modern period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present day. The latter is expressly focused on the community of St Gregory's, currently based at Downside Abbey; the former looks more widely within the English Benedictine Congregation, although, understandably considering Bellenger's Downside links, the same community, located at Douai for its first two centuries, remains the anchor point.

Written in a fluid style throughout, each essay is easily digestible in one sitting and undaunting, even for those with no prior knowledge of the history of the English Benedictines since the break with Rome. In the first volume, Bellenger raises three major theories surrounding the revived English Benedictines. Firstly, in the early sixteenth century, the Benedictine movement evolved as a half-way option between the Jesuits and the secular clergy for those who had a vocation. Secondly, looking outwards, the Benedictines were the third face of Catholicism, even if one that has been somewhat neglected in the historiographical